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OPERATIONS OF COMPANY A, 143d INFANTRY
(36th INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE CAPTURE
AND DEFENSE OF ROHRWILLER, FRANCE, EAST
OF BISCHWILLER, FRANCE, 2 FEBRUARY 1945
TO 6 FEBRUARY 1945
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY RIFLE COMPANY IN A
NIGHT ATTACK AND THE DEFENSE OF AN ENEMY HELD TOWN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
INDEX.....	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	2
ORIENTATION.....	3
Introduction.....	3
General Situation.....	4
Dispositions and Plans of the 143rd Infantry.....	6
First Battalion Situation and Plans.....	7
Company A, Its Dispositions and Plans.....	8
Movement to the Line of Departure.....	11
NARRATION.....	11
The Attack on Rohrwiller.....	11
The Defense of Rohrwiller.....	22
ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM.....	28
LESSONS.....	32
MAP A Seventh Army Fronts	
MAP B Regiment and Battalion Plans of Attack	
MAP C Company A Platoon Objectives	
MAP D Action in Rohrwiller	

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NOTE: The pages of reference A-2 are unnumbered and have been arbitrarily numbered from the first printed page.

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company A, 143d Infantry (36th Infantry Division) in the capture and defense of ROHRWILLER, FRANCE east of BISCHWILLER, FRANCE, 2 February 1945 to 6 February 1945.

To familiarize the reader with the major events leading to this action, a brief discussion of the situation prior to this operation follows.

Late in December 1944, the US Seventh Army, composed of the XV and VI Corps, was disposed generally along the RHINE RIVER from the COLMAR sector north to LAUTERBOURG, thence west along the line WISSEMBOURG-BITCHE-SARREGUEMINES.

(1) (See Map A)

In late November and during the month of December, elements of the US Seventh Army had succeeded in capturing vital STRASBOURG on the RHINE RIVER, (2) penetrating the rugged VOSGES MOUNTAINS (3) and pushing German forces to their own SEIGFRIED LINE in the VI Corps zone. (4)

The 36th Infantry Division, after having fought its way through the VOSGES MOUNTAINS, forced the formidable STE. MARIE PASS (for the first time in history), and succeeded in reaching the RHINE lowlands in the vicinity of RIBEAU-

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- (1) A-1, map facing p. 497
(2) A-1, p. 416
(3) A-2, p. 141
(4) A-1, p. 483

VILLE, FRANCE, (5) had been heavily engaged in the COLMAR sector between SELESTAT and the BONHOMME PASS. (6)

The Division had been in the line continuously since 15 August 1944 and was desperately in need of relief and rehabilitation. (7) A switch of positions with the 3d Infantry Division who was occupying the quiet STRASBOURG sector was completed on 21 December 1944 and a degree of rest from heavy fighting was obtained. (8) Complete relief from the lines was effected on 25 December when elements of the 42d Infantry Division, Task Force Linden, moved in to occupy these positions. (9) The 36th Infantry Division moved to vicinity SARREBOURG, FRANCE for rest and training. (10)

GENERAL SITUATION

On New Years Eve, 1944, the 36th Infantry Division, earmarked for XXI Corps reserve (11), was ordered to be ready to counter-attack against enemy penetrations in the XV Corps zone. (12)

As the old year came to a close, the front along the VI and XV Corps lines became suddenly quiet. The Germans were preparing to launch a counter-offensive, and the Allies were waiting for the first blows. (13) At midnight 31 December 1944 the Germans launched their attack south of BITCHE. (14)

Both the XV and VI Corps, which had made plans to de-

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- (5) A-2, p. 141
 - (6) A-1, p. 513
 - (7) A-1, p. 520
 - (8) A-2, p. 149
 - (9) A-3, p. 13 and 14
 - (10) A-2, p. 151
 - (11) A-1, p. 497
 - (12) A-1, p. 501
 - (13) A-1, p. 527
 - (14) A-2, p. 152

fend on their forward lines and to withdraw on orders fighting delaying actions to a secondary defense, (15) had felt the blows of this German assault and on 2 January 1945, US Seventh Army instructed VI Corps to withdraw to the main defense line along the eastern slopes of the VOSGES MOUNTAINS. (16)

These German attacks were continuous throughout the month of January, 1945 (17) and late in January the US Seventh Army, having withdrawn to new defensive positions, was holding the general line ROERBACH-HAGUENAU-BISCHWILLER-GAMBSHEIM. (18) (See Map A)

An attack by the enemy across the MODER RIVER on 25 January 1945 failed and the US Seventh Army regained the initiative. On 26 January VI Corps made plans for an assault against enemy positions to clear the area south of the line OBERHOFFEN-DRUSENHEIM and east to the RHINE RIVER (19) The 36th Infantry Division, having reverted to VI Corps control on 18 January 1945, (20) was primed to make this attack. (21)

The terrain favored the enemy. (22) The RHINE RIVER with its twisting, swampy banks was too long to be held solidly by our forces, and was vulnerable to infiltration and penetration. The VOSGES MOUNTAINS formed a strong barrier to our troops and provided the enemy with natural defensive barriers. (23)

(15) A-1, p. 501

(16) A-1, p. 561

(17) A-4, p. 60

(18) A-4, p. 61

(19) A-1, p. 653

(20) A-5, entry 2, 17 Jan 45 and entry 1, 18 Jan 45

(21) A-1, p. 653

(22) A-6, p. 4

(23) A-6, p. 5

During this period the replacement problem had become critical. (24) The 3d, 36th and 45th Divisions, after two years in combat, received priorities of junior officers. While out of the lines in December, the Division received an allotment of junior officers and men and they were quickly imbued with the spirit of the Division. Morale was excellent after the brief relief from combat. (25) Supply services concentrated on the individual soldier, (26) and winter clothing was adequate. (27)

On the other hand casualties for the German Volks Grenadier and Panzer Grenadier Divisions facing the US Seventh Army averaged between 2000 and 4000 during the winter and the German Army was incapable of further attack in the ALSACE sector. (28)

In accordance with VI Corps plan the division planned to use elements of all three regiments in the attack. The 142d Infantry would clear OBERHOFFEN and the DRUSENHEIM WOODS; the 143d Infantry would secure ROHRWILLER and the HERRLISHEIM-DRUSENHEIM road and assault HERRLISHEIM from the north; the 141st Infantry would assault HERRLISHEIM from the south. (29)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 143d INFANTRY

On 1 February 1945, the regiment was in assembly positions vicinity GEUDERTHEIM-BISCHWILLER.

Plans for the coming attack called for the First Battalion to seize and secure ROHRWILLER; the Second

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- (24) A-1, p. 529
 - (25) Personal knowledge
 - (26) A-1, p. 555
 - (27) Personal knowledge
 - (28) A-1, p. 623
 - (29) A-2, Map, p. 163

Battalion initially to attack on the right of the First Battalion and seize the road and railroad junction southeast of ROHRWILLER; the Third Battalion in reserve vicinity BISCHWILLER. (30) The Third Battalion, 142d Infantry, attached to the 143d Infantry for this operation, would attack simultaneously and seize the DRUSENHEIM WOODS.

(31) (See Map B)

FIRST BATTALION SITUATION AND PLANS

During the last days of January 1945, the First Battalion was in assembly area in GEUDERTHEIM making preparations for the coming attack.

Information concerning the enemy was gained primarily by visual reconnaissance and patrolling. (32)

A patrol from Company C, led by Sergeant William J. Stroup on the night of 30-31 January, obtained invaluable information concerning the enemy in ROHRWILLER. The town was well defended by an alert enemy with automatic weapons covering the entire area north of the objective. Exact positions were located and plotted and battalion informed. (33) Other patrol activities identified the CP Guard Company, 10th SS Panzer Division and the 5th Company, 22d Panzer Grenadier Regiment in ROHRWILLER from captured PWs. (34)

By the night of 31 January 1945, the First Battalion Commander had formulated his plan and at 010100 February 1945, Operations Instructions #2, Hq 1st Bn, 143d Inf, was issued. (See Map B)

(30) Statement of Lt. Col. Denholm, CO 143d Inf, during this operation, on 20 February 1950.

(31) A-5, OI No. 117, Hq, RCT 143, 2 Feb 45

(32) Personal knowledge

(33) Written report by Sgt. Stroup; Personal knowledge

(34) A-5, Entry 11, 2 Feb 45

The battalion plan called for Companies B and C to attack abreast, with Company B on the right to secure sections of ROHRWILLER in its zone; Company C on the left to secure ROHRWILLER in its zone and to establish strong points in its sector to protect the left flank of the battalion.

Company A, with a platoon of heavy machine guns attached, would initially follow Company C at an interval of 200 yards, and when Company C entered ROHRWILLER, would pass to the left of Company C and seize and secure that part of ROHRWILLER in its zone and establish strong points to protect the Battalion from counter-attack. An alternate route of advance was given Company A should the enemy defend so strongly from vicinity DRUSENHEIM WOODS as to prevent the company from pushing to the left of Company C. In that event Company A would follow Company C into ROHRWILLER, pass through Company C and clear and secure ROHRWILLER in its zone. D-Day, 1 February 1945; H-Hour, 2200 Hours; Artillery on call through Battalion. (35)

On 1 February 1945, the First Battalion left GEUDERTHEIM and at 1630 hours had closed into their assembly area in BISCHWILLER. (36)

COMPANY A, ITS DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS

Company A arrived in BISCHWILLER at approximately 0830 hours, 1 February 1945. A quartering party had been sent ahead, had secured billets and were waiting when the troops arrived.

On receiving Battalion orders that morning, Company A made its plans and issued orders to the platoons.

(35) A-5, 01 No. 2, Hq 1st Bn, 143, 1 Feb 45

(36) A-5, entry 72, 1 Feb 45; Personal knowledge

The Company would cross the line of departure in a column of platoons, order of march; 1st, Co Hqs, 2nd, Weapons, 3rd. First Platoon with a section of heavy machine guns attached would seize and secure that part of ROHRWILLER in its zone and block any counter-attack from direction of DRUSENHEIM; Second Platoon with a section of heavy machine guns attached would clear and secure that part of ROHRWILLER in its zone and block any counter attack from the south; Third Platoon, with the initial mission of protecting the left flank and rear of the company, would clear ROHRWILLER in its zone, prepare positions to protect the company left flank and be prepared to move to assist either First and Second Platoon on order; Weapons Platoon, initially intact, be prepared to support the First or Second Platoon on order; Company Headquarters would establish the Company CP and maintain communications with Battalion. (See Map C)

To assist in the preparation of detailed plans for the coming attack, large scale maps and aerial photographs were issued each platoon leader. This afforded an excellent means of study of the terrain, the route of march and of ROHRWILLER itself by all members of the company.

(NOTE: The commander of Company A was absent from the company during this period and Lt. Petranek, the Executive Officer was in temporary command. On returning in the afternoon of 1 February 1945, the commander was brought up to date on the situation and the plans made by Lt. Petranek approved.) (37)

The temperatures during the month of January had

(37) Personal knowledge

dropped to freezing with heavy snows falling throughout the month. During the last few days slightly warmer weather had caused an extreme thaw that overflowed the banks of the MODER RIVER and washed away all foot bridges. The only route over the river now was a treadway bridge that was covered with two to three feet of water. (38)

With this situation preventing the use of armor during the attack, General Dalquist (CG, 36th Infantry Division) notified the regiment at 1742 hours that the "attack will not be carried out tonight". (39)

The Company was fed a hot meal for supper and then bedded down for the night. (40)

At 1015 hours, 2 February Regiment informed Battalion that the attack would be carried out that night (41) and Company A started making last minute plans and preparations for the assault.

With a full day ahead of us, communications equipment was checked, ammunition checked and additional hand grenades issued, each member of each platoon was studying his individual job. When satisfaction was assured that every man knew his mission and job, a last minute orientation was given all troops on the importance of secrecy and silence throughout the initial stages of the attack. The vulnerability of our position during the approach march was emphasized, shown and explained and this forethought paid off. (42)

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- (38) A-2, p. 163; Personal knowledge
(39) A-5, entry 80, 1 Feb 45
(40) Personal knowledge
(41) A-5, entry 25, 2 Feb 45
(42) Personal knowledge

The morale of Company A was high and combat efficiency was considered excellent. The company was composed of a majority of veterans with a few new men which had recently arrived. With an effective combat strength of approximately 120 men and with no recent heavy engagements to reduce the size and fighting quality, Company A was prepared for the coming operation.

MOVEMENT TO THE LINE OF DEPARTURE

Company A, after a hot supper, fell in at 1900 hours (43) and following the other units of the First Battalion, moved out at 1913 hours. (44)

Movement to the line of departure, the bridge vicinity east of BISCHWILLER, was marked by many stops and starts. With all units of the 143d Infantry crossing over the one treadway bridge that was in, the delay held up all troops.

After what seemed an interminable length of time, the First Battalion started crossing and Company A arrived at the line of departure at approximately 2155 hours.

(45)

NARRATION

THE ATTACK ON ROHRWILLER (See Map D)

The First Platoon, commanded by Lt. Ralph K. Davies, crossed the line of departure at approximately 2200 hours (46) followed by Company Headquarters, Second Platoon, Weapons Platoon and Third Platoon. The swift moving MODER RIVER swelled by the thawing snows, had destroyed all foot

(43) Personal knowledge

(44) A-5, entry 86, 2 Feb 45

(45) A-5, entries 122 and 125, 2 Feb 45; Personal knowledge

(46) A-5, entry 122; Personal knowledge

bridges in the BISCHWILLER sector (47) and with the aid of a rope, to be used as a hand rail, stretched over the treadway bridge by the P and A Platoon of the First Battalion, (48) the Company moved across in single file through cold, muddy water two to three feet deep. After the entire Company had made the crossing, reorganization was effected and the Company continued on its mission. (49)

Visibility being very poor, Company A followed closely behind Company C to keep from losing contact.

Surprise would be the key to the success of our attack. The flat open terrain over which we had to march was a machine gunners dream, and one flare from the Germans would have placed the entire First Battalion in an extremely vulnerable position to enemy artillery, indirect and direct fires,

The thorough briefing given the men on the importance of silence throughout the initial stages of the assault was paying dividends, for only the slushing of our boots in the partly frozen snow and the occasional clink of metal against metal could be heard.

During this move to contact, platoon leaders and commander were continually patrolling the Company to maintain control and contact between elements of the company, and to keep down straggling.

As Company C left the column to attack ROHRWILLER in its zone, Sergeant Markman, Company A communications Sergeant, "T" spliced into their line and Company A moved on

(47) A-5, entry 93, 2 Feb 45
(48) A-5, entry 100, 2 Feb 45
(49) Personal knowledge

to assault the town in its zone.

There had been no evidence up to this time that the Germans were aware of our presence, for not an artillery round had fallen, no direct fire weapons had opened up, nor had any enemy outpost been encountered that could warn of our approach. (50) The Battalion order called for Company A to attack the eastern sector of ROHRWILLER unless prevented by strong enemy resistance from the DRUSENHEIM WOODS. (51) This resistance hadn't materialized and Company A, moving steadily, was nearing its objective. (52)

The faint, dark outline of the DRUSENHEIM WOODS to our front was the only outstanding terrain feature with which the Company could guide its direction of movement north of the city. The outline of ROHRWILLER itself was a faint blur to our right that blended with the surrounding terrain from that distance, and no possible way presented itself for determining just when the Company should change directions to the south to get into positions to make the actual assault on the town. The decision was made by a calculated guess of time and distance and at approximately 0030 hours 3 February 1945 oral orders were issued to the Platoon leaders to head toward ROHRWILLER.

Company A had maintained a column of platoons up until this time and the difficult problem of going into the attack formation in an entirely different direction of attack presented itself. The First Platoon, led by Lt.

(50) Personal knowledge

(51) A-5, OI No. 2, Hq 1st Bn, 143 Inf, 1 Feb 45

(52) Personal knowledge

Davies turned right and slowed its advance awaiting other elements of the Company to catch up. The Second Platoon, commanded by Lt. Gordon J. Hartzler, advanced to the right of the First Platoon, the Third Platoon moved up behind the First Platoon, and Company Headquarters and the Weapons Platoon, led by Lt. Edwin C. Petranek, also the Company Executive Officer, fell in behind the Second Platoon. The attack formation had been executed with some slight confusion and delay, but the company was in readiness to assault the town.

At approximately 0045 hours, Company A was about 200 or 250 yards from the edge of ROHRWILLER and moving in. (53)

It was at this point that the Germans had evidently discovered our presence for the first time, for the familiar fast firing crackle of a German machine gun opened up from vicinity the western edge of the town and tracer bullets were seen to cut across the middle of the company formation. Company A, including some of the newer officers and non-coms, hit the ground. Intermingled with the firing of the machine gun could be heard the familiar machine pistol and rifle fire.

Company A still had a few veteran non-commissioned officers and officers with battle-know-how, and under their direction and leadership, and somewhat profane encouragement, the company once again continued the assault. It was they that realized that the one machine gun firing into our formation was causing a chaotic condition. The newer officers and non-coms, some with no battle experience be-

(53) Personal knowledge

hind them, following the example of the veterans, quickly rallied their platoons to move on. (54)

After it was learned that this machine gun was in no way making our position untenable, the junior leaders started moving through their platoons and squads encouraging and urging their men on toward the objective.

Some few men, however, remained on the ground with the false impression that they were pinned down but this thought was overcome by individual conversation and they joined the company when moving on. With the exception of the few men that disappeared at the first burst from that German gun, the company once again began the attack on ROHRWILLER.

Surprise had now seemingly been lost and orders and commands changed from low talk and whispers to hollering and yells. The company commander was loudly ordering the Company to move on, the platoon leaders were yelling to their platoons to get up and go and the company was acting favorably during this noise and confusion for ROHRWILLER loomed just to our front. The spirit of the assault caught on and Company A moved into the outskirts of the town at approximately 0100 hours.

In the meantime the machine gun which had been firing into Company A had been silenced. (it was learned later that Company B had destroyed the position) and only scattered rifle fire was now heard. (55) At 0106 hours communications with Battalion was in and Company A reported

(54) Statement of Capt. Hartzler, then 1st Lt. on 25 March 1950; personal knowledge

(55) Personal knowledge

that they were in the town. (56)

The First Platoon with the mission to sieze and secure that part of ROHRWILLER in its zone and protect the Battalion from counter-attack from direction of DRUSENHEIM, had cut to the left at the outskirts of ROHRWILLER and had hit the town at the eastern edge on Highway 3. It actually missed the town in its zone and had come up behind the German positions from the direction of DRUSENHEIM. The enemy was caught completely unprepared for an attack from that direction and complete surprise had been maintained by the platoon throughout its action. Very little firing was done. The squads, in accordance with prior plans by the platoon leader, were working from house to house, clearing their sector of the city of all Germans. They added their share to the number of prisoners that Company A captured. The platoon had not suffered a single casualty up to this point.

Simultaneously with the clearing of its sector, the platoon leader began organizing his defense. For the purpose of establishing a road block on the ROHRWILLER-DRUSENHEIM highway, one section of heavy machine guns from the Battalion Heavy Weapons Company had been attached to the First Platoon. However, at the first outburst of enemy weapons fire, this section took off, and the platoon was left without heavy fire support. Also the bazooka team had lost their bazooka and so a very important anti-tank weapon was missing. With the BAR the only automatic weapon at his command, the platoon leader proceeded to establish

(56) A-5, entry 12, 3 Feb 45

the road block. With only this very small amount of firepower, the Company left flank was in a very dangerous position from any counter-attack that might be made by the enemy. (57)

As the First Platoon pulled out to flank ROHRWILLER from the east, Lt. Hartzler, leading his Second Platoon, moved straight in, hitting the town at its northern edge in the vicinity of the town cemetery. Not a very pleasant greeting for a company of riflemen bent on destroying the enemy. A quick check was made of the cemetery and with no Germans evident the platoon moved on and began a methodical check of all houses on "CEMETARY LANE". (58)

It must be remembered that Company A had not fired a shot, nor expended any type of ammunition to this point. Each man had drawn an extra supply of hand grenades before leaving BISCHWILLER and was prepared to use them in clearing the town of any enemy.

The Germans had offered no resistance and it began to look like the town was defended by only a small holding garrison, with that force in no way disposed to meet an enemy. Only a few scattered shots could be heard and they were coming from the vicinity of Company B and C. (59)

The boundary between Company A and Company C gave the cemetery and the street to Company C. As soon as the Second Platoon had arrived at the cemetery, it was immediately known that we had cut too soon and was now in Company C sector. However this was no time to worry over boundaries,

(57) Statement of Lt. Davies, 9 Jan 50

(58) Statement of Capt. Hartzler, then 1st Lt., on 25 Mar 50; Personal knowledge

(59) Personal knowledge

for we were now in enemy held territory, and since no part of Company C was anywhere evident, Company A continued on. The move down this street was marked by no particular action other than the firing by our own men as they moved from house to house, and the occasional grenade throwing when they had located a suspicious area or wanted to make sure that no German was hiding in the basement of any house.

The platoon reached the main street of ROHRWILLER, Highway 3, at approximately 0145 hours, clearing the town as it went. Investigating some houses and by-passing others, it succeeded in capturing 25 to 30 prisoners before arriving on its objective. The majority of the prisoners captured were still in the cellars of the houses and no manned gun positions had been encountered during the entire assault. (60)

As the Second Platoon was preparing its defenses on the southern outskirts of the town, a faint noise was heard in one of the houses that had been by-passed. The platoon leader, not taking any chances, threw 3 or 4 hand grenades in the basement window at the rear, then ran around to the front door to make a further investigation. As he arrived in front, a German officer came out the door firing, but all shots went wild. Lt. Hartzler fired at the German but missed. At that moment one of the Second Platoon men came around the corner and succeeded in killing the German with one shot. This dead German officer proved to be the major in charge of the defense of ROHRWILLER. Eight other officers surrendered from this same

(60) Statment of Capt. Hartzler, 25 Mar 50; personal knowledge

house. On further investigation, 2 more officers were found dead in the basement, evidently killed by the hand grenades. In addition, the platoon found a good supply of wine, cigars and food and the radio was still playing with some very nice music coming forth. The Second Platoon had done very well in this encounter. (61)

In the meantime the Third Platoon, with the initial mission of protecting the left flank and rear of the Company had followed the First Platoon toward the northern outskirts of the town. However, when the First Platoon cut to the left, the Third Platoon kept straight ahead. It entered ROHRWILLER to the east of the cemetery and began clearing the houses north of Highway 3. They, too, had their share of success in capturing a few Germans and the number of prisoners taken by Company A continued mounting, all with very little fighting and very few casualties.

Company Headquarters, led by First Sergeant Tarnove, had followed the Second Platoon in and had established the Company CP in the basement of a house directly across the street from the church in the center of town. When they moved in, there was hot coffee and warm potatoes on the table. A candle was still burning, furnishing some degree of light and the field telephone to some position or installation was still hooked up. (It is not known where the wire led to.) The Germans here had evidently made a very hasty retreat.

The weapons platoon, led by Lt. Petranek, had been

(61) Statement of Capt. Hartzler, then 1st Lt., on
25 Mar 50

separated from the Company and at approximately 0300 hours could not be located. It was learned later that it had cut further to the right of the Second Platoon when entering ROHRWILLER and was deeper in Company C sector, closing in. Acting as riflemen, the Weapons Platoon also captured a few prisoners.

At approximately 0345 hours, the first faint light of dawn was just beginning to show. With the ground and the houses still covered with snow, brightening the early gray hours, the forms of the buildings and houses were taking shape. The men of the company could be seen entering and investigating each suspicious area. The occasional firing of rifles and the explosion of hand grenades could be heard as the company worked from house to house. (62)

It was at this hour that 2 lone Germans executed a surprise move that caught the entire company unprepared.

The Third Platoon could be seen in and around the yards and houses north of the main street. Elements of the Second Platoon were busy investigating the yards and houses on the south side of Highway 3, and the Company Commander was standing in the yard of a house on the south side of the street in the vicinity of the company boundary as designated by Battalion. The First Platoon was still occupied farther east in its sector of the town.

This was the picture of Company A at 0345 hours, when from the direction to the west of our positions along the main street, the rumble of a motor could be heard. At this moment a small car of approximately the same size as the

(62) Personal knowledge

US $\frac{1}{2}$ ton truck roared around the bend in the street heading for German territory. As each man in a position to fire realized that it was an enemy vehicle he raised his weapon and fired, but the vehicle was traveling at such a fast rate of speed that any degree of aimed fire was impossible and all shots missed. The two lone Germans could be seen huddled low and pushing the VOLKSWAGON (type of vehicle) for all the speed it was capable of making. It had traveled through part of Company C sector, through the First, Second and Third Platoon areas of Company A and was well on its way to friendly territory. Many shots were fired from all directions but as far as is known not one shot was effective. (63)

After a check with each platoon, it was learned that all had reached their objective and were now consolidating their positions. With this information, the company commander located his CP to notify Battalion that Company A was on its objective.

On arriving at Company Headquarters, CO Company A found that it was not only the CP, but had also been turned in to a company aid station, a company PW enclosure and a straggler post for those men lost from their units. The casualties, a few from each platoon, were all walking wounded. The prisoners, some 35 in all, were lined up in a column of threes, placed in charge of the walking wounded and sent back to Battalion. The stragglers were returned to their units.

During the attack phase of this operation Company A

(63) Statement of Capt. Hartzler, 25 Mar 50; personal knowledge.

had suffered very few casualties with all of these being only lightly wounded, had captured approximately 35 prisoners, had completely surprised the enemy and was on its objective with very little fighting having taken place.

(64)

THE DEFENSE OF ROHRWILLER (See Map D)

To reinforce the fires of the First Battalion in the defense of ROHRWILLER the Regimental Cannon Company was attached (65) and at 0330 hours 3 February 1945, the mounts were reported in town and in position. (66)

However, this was no help to Company A for it was occupying the east end of town in a most vulnerable position with only its organic BARS and light machine guns to defend its sector. The heavy machine guns which had been attached were nowhere to be found and no Cannon Company mounts had been given the company to reinforce its fires and offer protection to armor. (67) On checking with Battalion it was learned that a platoon of TDs had been attached to the First Battalion and at 0347 hours the platoon, composed of a total of 3 TDs was on the way to ROHRWILLER. (68) Company A received two of these. One was placed in support of the First Platoon, while the other went to the Second Platoon.

When Company A was notified that the TDs had arrived, Lt. Davies, First Platoon leader, proceeded to Battalion Headquarters to contact his. On returning to the First Platoon sector with the Sergeant in charge of the TD to

(64) Personal knowledge

(65) A-5, OI No. 2, Hq 1st Bn, 143 Inf, 010100 Feb 45

(66) A-5, entry 37, 3 Feb 45

(67) Personal knowledge

(68) A-5, entry 41, 3 Feb 45

make reconnaissance for a location for the gun, Lt. Davies noticed a group of men go into a house on his right. Thinking these were some of the new replacements that he had received prior to the attack, he called out the password. The reply was a shot from a German rifle that wounded Lt. Davies. He turned his platoon over to Sergeant Baxter, the platoon Sergeant, gave him the situation and was evacuated to the aid station. (69) Sergeant Baxter proceeded to clean out the house and a few more Germans were taken by Company A. The TD Sergeant set up his gun on the east end of town overlooking the DRUSENHEIM-ROHRWILLER highway and the DRUSENHEIM WOODS and Company A felt a little better. (70)

The Lt. in charge of the 2 TDs reported to the Company CP at approximately 0620 hours with the remaining TD and it was turned over to Lt. Hartzler. On returning to the Second Platoon sector, Lt. Hartzler was fired on by a German machine pistol. The TD Lt. reported to the company that Lt. Hartzler had been killed. This was definite proof that remnants of the German garrison was still in town and orders went out to all platoons to make another and more thorough search of all houses.

The information brought back by the TD officer proved to be false, however, for at approximately 0720 hours, Lt. Hartzler reported in to the CP and once again the TD officer and his TD was turned over to the Second Platoon Leader. This time they succeeded in going into position. This made the situation on the right flank a little more secure

(69) Statement of Lt. Davies on 9 Jan 50; Personal knowledge
(70) Personal knowledge

and Company A continued to strengthen its defenses. (71)

In the meantime, the Third Battalion, 142d Infantry had succeeded in reaching and penetrating the DRUSENHEIM WOODS (72) and contact with them was made by First Battalion. (73)

During the early hours of this first morning, the enemy began firing artillery into the town and at 0650 hours, we were receiving very heavy shelling. (74) These heavy shellings continued throughout the day and consisted of light and medium artillery and direct fire from the famed German 88. This 88 seemed to be concentrated on the church across the street from Company A CP for the tall steeple was seen to come down brick by brick.

With this terrific shelling coming after the attack and securing of ROHRWILLER, all platoons were alerted for this could mean only one thing. A counter-attack. (75)

The Third Battalion, 142d Infantry received a counter-attack against their positions in the DRUSENHEIM WOODS at 0912 hours and the situation in ROHRWILLER became very tense. (76)

Our TD with Company A in the First Platoon sector proved its worth by knocking out a tracked vehicle on the DRUSENHEIM-ROHRWILLER road. Four enemy tanks were reported moving toward ROHRWILLER from the southeast. Other tanks were reported coming down the road from the direc-

(71) Statement of Capt. Hartzler, then 1st Lt. on 25 Mar 50; Personal knowledge

(72) A-5, entry 44, 3 Feb 45

(73) A-5, entry 67, 3 Feb 45

(74) A-5, entry 82, 3 Feb 45

(75) Personal knowledge

(76) A-5, entries 114 and 115, 3 Feb 45

tion of DRUSENHEIM, (77) and at 1023 hours enemy tanks and infantry were seen north of the Third Battalion, 142d Infantry on the main road. (78)

Company A was sitting tight and waiting. However an attack did not develop against our positions and we could see the enemy tanks withdrawing toward DRUSENHEIM.

The remainder of the first day in ROHRWILLER was spent in watching the Germans throw accurate and heavy artillery throughout the town. (79)

During the late hours of 3 February 1945 and the early hours of 4 February, this continuous shelling slackened and at 0220 hours, 4 February 1945, all was quiet in the First Battalion area. (80)

The first gray dawn of the morning of 4 February 1945 opened with more heavy and accurate shelling by the enemy and Company A continued investigating houses and suspicious areas. During the morning hours, some members of the Second Platoon searching a house near the boundary of the First and Second Platoons, captured seven more Germans and another radio. This group proved to be the artillery liaison section assigned to the German garrison defending ROHRWILLER and the radio had been used for the past day and a half during our occupation to direct this very accurate artillery fire into the town. (81)

With enemy resistance reported breaking up, at 1010 hours 4 February 1945, Regiment directed that the 4th Pro-

(77) A-5, entry 123, 3 Feb 45; Personal knowledge

(78) A-5, entry 124, 3 Feb 45

(79) Personal knowledge

(80) A-5, entry 8, 45

(81) Statement of Capt. Hartzler, 25 Mar 50; Personal knowledge

visional Battalion (a battalion organized in December 1944 composed of the Antitank Company, Cannon Company, elements of each Heavy Weapons Company and elements of each Battalion Headquarters Company (82) relieve the First Battalion, less one company and at 1730 hours the 4th Battalion, with Company A attached, assumed responsibility of ROHRWILLER. (83)

The entire second day, 4 February, was marked only by continuous heavy shelling. No attempt by the enemy to regain the town was made and Company A spent a day of watchful waiting.

During the morning of 5 February 1945, a noticeably decrease in artillery fires was evident, no enemy action observed and a comparatively quiet day was spent. (84)

On the evening of 5 February, the Commanding Officer of the 143d Infantry notified the Commanding officer of the 4th Battalion that he believed the Germans were pulling out of HERRLISHEIM and to send a patrol into the town. If the town was reported clear, Company A would move in. (85)

The patrol returned with the report from civilians that the Germans had pulled out during the past few days. This information was verified by another patrol and at 0145 hours, 6 February 1945, Company A moved out to occupy HERRLISHEIM. (86)

In summarizing the results of this operation: From

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- (82) Monograph of Capt. Harry C. Stakes, Ex O 4th Bn during this period, p. 4 and 5; personal knowledge
(83) A-5, entries 51 and 98, 4 February 45; personal knowledge
(84) Personal knowledge
(85) A-5, entries 81 and 98, 5 Feb 45; personal knowledge
(86) A-5, entry 9, 6 Feb 45; Personal knowledge

the standpoint of the objective gained and the mission accomplished, the success of this operation cannot be denied. It is felt, however, that several factors must be considered, other than the actual attack, that contributed to the success of Company A and the First Battalion.

First: the complete failure of the defending enemy to maintain even the smallest detachment of security forces to their front and flanks was a blundering error that cannot be overlooked. This permitted our troops to fulfill a tactical mission with the highest degree of surprise. (87) Secondly: with enemy tanks and infantry operating in the HERRLISHEIM sector (88) while no tanks had appeared in the ROHRWILLER area during the initial stages of the attack, it is believed that the enemy was concentrating more forces to the south with the thought of keeping the DRUSENHEIM-HERRLISHEIM road open for a route of withdrawal, thus leaving ROHRWILLER with a comparatively weak force to defend the town with no supporting armor. Thirdly: it is further believed that the morale of the German troops must have been very low, the type of soldiers responsible for the defense of ROHRWILLER could not be considered too well trained and their combat efficiency would be rated as unsatisfactory, for the fight that is necessary in the stubborn defense of any area was practically non-existent.

During this operation Company A had succeeded in capturing approximately 50 prisoners, had killed the garrison commander, had called for no artillery or mortar fire, had expended a comparatively small amount of small arms ammu-

(87) Personal knowledge

(88) A-1, p. 657

dition, had very few casualties with none killed and had succeeded in its mission with very little fighting. (98)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. THE BATTALION PLAN

It is not considered good military tactics to commit all units of an infantry battalion as was done in this operation. To withhold a reserve, no matter how small, to be used by the Battalion Commander as he sees fit to influence some future action is a prime requisite. However, it is felt that the overall picture of a planned coordinated attack was a big factor in considering the employment of all units of the battalion. The First Battalion was the interior battalion of the Regiment with the 3d Battalion, 142d Infantry, attached, attacking on the left to seize and secure objectives to the northeast and east of ROHRWILLER, and the Second Battalion, 143d Infantry attacking to seize and secure objectives to the south and southeast of ROHRWILLER. With the contemplated success of these two units, the First Battalion would, in reality, have two rifle companies that could be considered reserves after a successful attack, for only one company could then be considered close to the enemy lines, that one being to the east end of the town. This was later proved correct when Company B, the unit to the west end of the town, was pulled out of the lines to be used on another mission.

2. MOVEMENT TO THE ATTACK

The direction of movement to the attack, the by-passing of another unit, and the change in direction prior to

the assault which Company A had to execute would have been somewhat of a difficult maneuver to make even in daylight. Although Company A succeeded in arriving on the objective, a certain amount of confusion did occur when going into the attack formation after the change in direction. Had the enemy chosen this moment to open up with automatic weapons and rifle fires, Company A would have been at a considerable disadvantage to effect any fire and maneuver to quiet these weapons. It required the combined efforts of all officers and non-commissioned officers working under the very unfavorable conditions of darkness and silence to keep the company in formation and heading in the right direction, and still maintain the surprise element that was so necessary to the success of the operation.

3. CONTROL

Control of stragglers, those men that get conveniently lost and keeping contact and control of a unit in the attack always presents a difficult problem to any commander. These problems are enhanced and emphasized during a night assault when vision is reduced to a minimum and visual communications are non-existent. The commander must rely completely on his officers and non-commissioned officers to maintain a continuous police and patrol of their platoons and squads to assure the arrival on the objective with the maximum of men and with a highest degree of control. It is almost certain that Company A would have arrived on the objective with fewer men, had this

practice let up for even a short period of time.

4. FAILURES OF THE ENEMY

It was known from patrol reports that had been operating in the vicinity of ROHRWILLER that positions were dug and automatic weapons available to completely cover the entire zone of attack of the First Battalion with well directed and coordinated bands of fire. The terrain offered an ideal situation for a perfect final protective line that would have been almost impossible to penetrate and very difficult to flank. The failure to keep outposts and security detachments to the front to provide a timely warning of an approaching attack can only be blamed on the garrison commander. From the captured liaison section and artillery radio it was known that indirect fires was available to reinforce the defensive fires of ROHRWILLER, but not one round fell during the entire attack. Almost without exception, the personnel responsible to man positions, call for artillery fires and warn of an eminent attack was holed up in the warm basements of the houses throughout the town. No indication was shown that the garrison commander had made any check of his positions to assure that the defensive positions were occupied with alert personnel.

5. LEADERSHIP

When Company A first received fires into its formation at the outskirts of ROHRWILLER, almost the entire company hit the ground. The thought running through many of the men's minds was that they were pinned down and could move

no further. This was a false impression under these circumstances for only the one weapon was firing and it was quickly ascertained by those with battle experience that the situation had in no way become critical. It was at this time that the officers and the better non-commissioned officers started rallying their squads and platoons to get up and move on. This required leadership of the highest degree for they were working under very adverse conditions. Through their leadership and confidence which inspired their men, Company A moved on to a successful mission. A rifle company commander is greatly dependent on those officers and non-commissioned officers under him to exercise strong leadership under critical conditions.

6. ATTACHED UNITS

When one unit, regardless of size, is attached to another unit, it becomes an integral part and the responsibility of the unit to which it is attached. The leader of the then parent unit is responsible for these new men and their employment in combat. He must make every effort to learn their names and faces as he does his own men, and they should be accepted into his organization with the same degree of interest. In the case of the attached heavy machine guns which had been given Company A for this operation, this was evidently not the case, for when the company arrived on its objective, neither section of the heavy machine gun platoon could be found, and it was evident that they became lost during the first outburst of enemy machine gun fire. With the loss of these weapons, a very important

weapon to the defense of our sector was not on hand. Had these sections been checked throughout the attack as closely as the members of the company, it is very probable that heavy fire support would have been available in the organization of the defense.

7. SURPRISE

Throughout the initial planning stage, the period just prior to the attack and during the actual assault on the town, secrecy had been stressed to the utmost. Normal artillery fires had been carried out, normal patrolling conducted and limited objective attacks made in other sectors. This activity had a tendency to lull the enemy in the First Battalion zone into a false sense of security. The briefing given Company A just prior to moving out proved its worth during the movement to the attack for noise was held to a minimum. This pre-operation secrecy and normal activities that were maintained produced the surprise result that was wanted, for on arrival on the objective, it is found that the enemy was in no way prepared to adequately defend in his zone.

LESSONS

1. The commitment of all units of a battalion is justified when the overall picture of a co-ordinated attack warrants it.
 2. The direction of movement in a night attack should be simple and devoid of any changes in direction.
 3. Control of a unit during a night operation can be maintained by constant surveillance and policing by the
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officers and non-commissioned officers.

4a. Outpost and security detachments must be continually alert during the night to warn of approaching hostile forces and prevent surprise.

4b. Perfect defensive terrain is of no value unless prepared positions are adequately manned.

4c. Any officer responsible for the defense of a sector should make a constant check and continuous supervision to assure the adequacy of the defense.

5. Strong leadership by the combined efforts of junior officers and non-commissioned officers of a unit will bring order and control out of chaos and confusion.

6. Members of an attached unit should be accepted and treated as organic to the unit to which they have been attached.

7. The effect of secrecy to obtain surprise should be stressed throughout all phases of an operation to assure the successful accomplishment of the mission.